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Demonstrating impact in teaching

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Published: 24/04/2014

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Citation for published version (APA):

Moore, A. (2014). *Demonstrating impact in teaching: learning via traditional methods vs learning by observing professional practice.*

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The project aims to compare and contrast two small cohorts of students learning the same subject area, over two phases.

Phase One: Undergraduate students learning about the subject of evidence via observing courtroom procedure and holding discussion seminars immediately after each of those court visits.

Phase Two: Undergraduate students learning about the subject of evidence via traditional lecture and tutorial format alone.

Note: Students from phase one were also in phase two classes which allowed for comparison of summative results between students learning the same subject via different / combined methods.

INDICATIVE CONCLUSIONS

These outcomes are based on the cohorts in question. As results may vary across different cohorts and subject areas, it would be useful to continue the research either with similar cohorts on a longitudinal basis, or in the same area with a larger sample. This would allow for absolute conclusions.

Indication One: There are real difficulties with ensuring that all relevant subject areas are covered when observing practice alone over a comparable period of time in a pure academic setting such as a twelve week module. However further probing in focus groups indicated a necessary discussion on the merits of *holistic learning versus serialistic learning*.

Indication Two: Engagement is significantly improved in all areas of study for students taking part in practical observation and not just the subject area in question.

"When I woke up on a day where I knew it was a project day, I was genuinely looking forward to going to University and anticipating the types of thing we might see and what we might learn. I don't always feel the same about going in to some lectures. There are some lectures that I would actually rather not come into University for and feel like I have to force myself to get through them. If those other subjects had some other practical element like what we have had on the project that would make a huge difference to how much I would enjoy the course."

(Student Research Subject, 2013)

Indicator Three: The confidence levels of students both relating to the subject area in question, but also importantly relating to their overall degree studies improves significantly after taking part in practical exercises such as this project.

Indicator Four: There appear to be significant implications to both employability and long-term career planning linked to learning by observing practice in this way. Anecdotal evidence of this can be seen within the student cohorts taking part in the project. Implications ranged from students gaining absolute certainty of the area of law or criminal justice that they will pursue upon graduation, to students having viewed practice deciding that they do not want to pursue employment in the area at all, something that they did not anticipate prior to their observations.

IMPACT

Impact stemming directly from the project can be demonstrated in a number of ways.

Academic Impact: The research and indicators are now being used / continued on a cross disciplinary basis as the research lead has permanently changed departments from law (Business School) to criminal justice (Social Sciences). A process of informing staff within the new department of the project and associated results has begun.

As part of a recent Institutional review of the criminal justice programme, a panel of external assessors recommended making better use of local court provision to feed into academic study. The panel were informed of the project and student engagement with it. As a result, the panel recommendations are being further researched by the project lead regarding how court facilities can be utilised. This may lead to instrumental impact relating to the service provision given to students.

Further future capacity building impact will hopefully be demonstrated as UWS is in the process of planning a new major facility development at Hamilton campus. As part of the consultation, the research lead has requested that one teaching room be designed as a mock court facility to allow for relevant practical skills development across a range of disciplines, the students of which would come into contact with courts on a regular basis in their future employment. These would include students on programmes such as law, criminal justice, social work, and forensic science.

Economic and Societal Impact: Economic impact is difficult to ascertain at this stage. As the research concerns an undergraduate student learning / teaching development project, it is difficult to quantify economic benefits with certainty. However, a link between societal and economic impact can be seen as a number of students involved in the project have indicated that they are going to continue their studies by enrolling on one of the 'clinical' law programmes at another HEI. These programmes include a high degree of practical skills development, which would potentially save on costs associated with practical training at a later stage for those individuals.

From a societal impact perspective, in particular at least one court not included in the project has learned of the associated activities (Greenock Sheriff Court), and has allowed students to observe summary cases from the position of the vacant jury box for educational purposes. Demonstrating closer links and awareness between the profession and educational institutions in this way is a huge benefit.

SUSTAINABILITY

As noted when discussing impact above, in redeveloping the criminal justice programme, a recommendation was made by external assessors to make better use of local court facilities, and this is in active development. As there are no economic costs associated with this aspect of provision, the main considerations are purely theoretical / pedagogical.

The continual development of theoretical and practical skills for large cohorts in this way could however be difficult due to the restricted nature of courtroom viewing facilities, and so the development of a mock courtroom within the University as noted in the impact section would allow for a contingency that would also assist the continual improvement of practical skills relevant to a variety of disciplines.



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